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ABSTRACT

The beginnings of a pragmatic rhetorical theory can help relate rhetoric to human meaning systems. A pragmatic rhetorical theory is not concerned with whether or not an intentional experience is true to an objective reality beyond human experience, but rather deals with how rhetoric interacts with experiences in the construction of human meaning theories. A semiotic theory of meaning allows meaning to shift constantly as new signs and new contexts are experienced by the brain, which allows humans to construct "cultural units of meaning" that change as they react rhetorically with others. However, there is no "cultural linguistic competence" to go along with cultural units of meaning, only individual competence, because cultures and societies do not talk, only individuals do. For example, there is no "correct" American language with correct meanings and pronunciations, only individual expressions and content systems. Humans learn to interact as individuals through semiotically experiencing the rhetoric of others, associating denotations with semantic markers used by others, connotations with memories of experiences, and values and attitudes with complex links of connotative and denotative semantic markers. They also try to arrange their dictionaries of signs hierarchically to shape reality (editing entries to create consistent belief systems but never totally eliminating inconsistencies from the underlying rhetorical encyclopedia). In this framework, truth and objectivity are only relative to an individual dictionary, and thus cannot be universal or absolute. (SKC)

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MEANING AND KNOWLEDGE IN A PRAGMATIC THEORY OF RHETORIC

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MEANING AND KNOWLEDGE IN A PRAGMATIC THEORY OF RHETORIC

Scott's 1967 article "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic" began a long and continued discussion in our conventions and journals about the epistemic nature of rhetoric.[1] But in his choice of terms, Scott may have led us astray into an unnecessary philosophical argument about the nature of reality and the ways of knowing reality. The use of the term "epistemic" carries with it the philosophical history of episteme, that certain knowledge of unchanging universals sought by philosophers from Plato on. But Scott was opposed to the notion of certainty in human knowledge.[2] What he seemed to be offering was a theory of knowledge construed as practical knowledge of human affairs.[3] Scott's approach was in the tradition of Protagoras, Isocrates, and Cicero, all of whom understood rhetoric as the means of managing the affairs of life well.[4] To the ancients, rhetoric was the art of using language as an instrument. This art atrophied after Cicero, and in the Middle Ages rhetoric became little more than ornamentation.[5] But now, in the 20th Century, with mass media transmitting political rhetoric to an enfranchised populace, rhetoric again can be seen as impacting the way humans interact with their environment. What the age needs is a rhetorical theory that explains how rhetoric affects the practical knowledge humans use to make decisions.

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[1] Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Central States Speech Journal 18 (1967): 9-17. For an interpretive summary of the first dozen years, see Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," Central States Speech Journal 29 (1978): 73-91. For more recent updates, see Barry Brummett, "On to Rhetorical Relativism," Quarterly Journal of Speech 68 (1982): 425-37; and also Richard A. Cherwitz and James W. Hikins, Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication, series ed. Carroll C. Arnold (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1986).

[2] Scott 17.

[3] For Aristotle's distinction between types of knowledge, or intellectual virtues, see Nichomachean Ethics, 6.1-7.

[4] Plato, Protagoras 318d5-e6. Isocrates, Antidosis 271. Cicero, Orator 238, and all of Academica.

[5] Tzvetan Todorov, Theories du symbole (Paris: Seuil, 1977), Chap. 2.

Admittedly, the term "epistemology" can be understood to stand for all human ways of knowing. But arguments about epistemology soon tend to drift back into the construal of knowledge as "justified, true belief"--the epistemic problem philosophers have wrestled with for years.[6] Perhaps something would be gained by rhetoricians undertaking to solve problems philosophers have found unsolvable, but I think our time could more profitably be spent examining that aspect of knowledge which is simply coping with the human environment. So in this paper I present the beginnings of a pragmatic rhetorical theory that attempts to relate rhetoric to human meaning systems because human meaning systems are the grounds on which practical decisions are made.

From this point of view, the question is not "How does rhetoric affect our discovery of justified, true beliefs?" but rather "How does rhetoric affect the way we experience life?" The individual human being is an organism engaged with its environment in the process of living. As phenomenologists have observed, the basic data processed by the organism is not a unit of sensation but a unit of experience. And units of experience are units of meaning. "Thus," Gadamer writes, "the concept of experience is the epistemological basis for all knowledge of the objective."[7] Experience collapses the subjective and objective because it is the product of both individual meaning and the environment:

> What can be called an experience establishes itself in memory. We mean the lasting meaning that an experience has for someone who has had it. This is the reason for talking about an intentional experience and the teleological structure of consciousness. On the other hand, however, in the notion of experience there is also a contrast of life with mere concept. The experience has a definite immediacy which eludes every opinion about its meaning. Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and it is part of its meaning that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an inalienable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life.[8]

A pragmatic rhetorical theory is not concerned with whether or not the intentional experience is true to an objective reality beyond human knowledge.

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[6] Cherwitz & Hikins 21.

[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury, 1975) 59.

[8] Gadamer 60.

Let the philosophers dispute the incorrigible foundations of objective epistemology. But rhetoricians are interested in how rhetoric interacts with experiences in the construction of human meaning systems. Thus a rhetorical theory must correlate with a theory of meaning. From opposing points of view, Brummett on the one hand and Cherwitz and Hikins on the other have all acknowledged the importance of meaning to the concept of rhetorical ways of knowing.[9] The pragmatic theory of rhetoric offered here considers human actions to be based on human meaning systems, and so rhetorical effects must be changes to that meaning system.

The theory of meaning employed here is one based on semiotics, the study of the nature of signs. Although the study of signs has a long history, the theory of semiotics in this paper is based primarily on the work of C. S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, as modified by Umberto Eco.[10] I believe Eco's modifications to the theory provide a non-referential theory of meaning that avoids the roadblocks of philosophical epistemology. I have additionally modified Eco's formulations with a Protagorean emphasis in order to avoid any hypostasis of intersubjective structures. As modified, semiosis provides an explanation of how humans interact with their environment and how rhetoric affects that interaction.

A Semiotic Theory of Meaning

In semiotic theory, a sign (or more precisely, a sign-function) is a meeting place for elements of two different systems, one concerned with expression and the other concerned with content. So in de Saussure, the linguistic sign consists of a "signified" (concept, content) and a "signifier"

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[9] Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy & Rhetoric 9 (1976): 28. Cherwitz & Hikins 71.

[10] C. S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," Philosophical Writings of Peirce, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover,1955) 98-119; Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (1959; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics, Advances in Semiotics, gen. ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976); Umberto Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, Advances in Semiotics, gen. ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

(sound-image, expression).[11] When content and expression are correlated, a sign-function occurs; so the sign is not an entity, but the function of a correlation that is the act of semiosis.[12]

This act of semiosis is not necessarily linguistic. For example, in his theory of symbolic inducement, Gregg notes that perception is an act of modeling:

> Models are structures of assimilated and/or associated patterns which are composed of structures of information. Perception is never of an individual entity, but always of entities in relation to other entities so that it is the structure of the relationship that is abstracted for perception.[13]

To Peirce, the kind of abstraction Gregg refers to is an act of semiosis involving iconic signs.[14] In other words, the mind/brain's act of experiencing begins not with sensations but with signs or models. This sign is then interpreted by other signs, which are interpreted by more signs. The progression is potentially infinite.[15] And the interpreting signs can be simple or as complex as an argument. Eco explains how this sequence of interpretation narrows down cultural units of meaning:

> Signification (as well as communication), by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes cultural units in an asymptotic fashion, without ever allowing one to touch them directly, though making them accessible through other units. Thus a cultural unit never obliges one to replace it by means of something which is not a semiotic entity, and never asks to be explained by some Platonic, psychic or objectal entity. Semiosis explains itself by itself.[16]

This notion of circumscribing suggests that these cultural units of meaning are determined not just by a sequence of interpretants but by a relationship to other cultural units. Oppositions to other units draw

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[11] De Saussure 67.

[12] Eco, Theory 49.

[13] Richard B. Gregg, Symbolic Inducement and Knowing: A Study in the Foundations of Rhetoric, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication, series ed. Carroll C. Arnold (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1984) 46.

[14] Peirce 105.

[15] Peirce 100. Eco, Theory 68.

[16] Eco, Theory 71.

boundaries for a given cultural unit, that is, its "semantic field." We understand a term not o.ly by what it is but also by what it is not. So we draw the boundaries of the meaning for "bachelor" in opposition to the meaning for "married." But exactly where we draw the boundaries will depend upon our experiences, including especially our rhetorical experiences. And semantic fields are constantly changing as new experiences are encountered through semiosis.

The result of the series of interpretants and oppositions is what Eco calls an encyclopedia. This overlapping network of connections and oppositions cannot be graphically represented because of its complexity.[17] The encyclopedia includes denotation, connotation, and many considerations of context and circumstance. Eco opposes the notion of a complex encyclopedia with the notion of a structured "dictionary" in which every sign would be defined by its relationship to a limited number of simpler signs, such as genus and species. Rhetors often claim that certain limited meanings are naturally correct. In fact, Eco shows that dictionary systems of meaning are simply artificial derivations from the underlying encyclopedia of meaning.[18] Meaning never escapes the circle of semiosis.

This complex and virtually infinite encyclopedia is made up of what Eco calls cultural units of meaning. Units of meaning are cultural because our rhetorical interactions with others determine much of our interpretation of events. Because the encyclopedia of language (and other forms of semiosis) depends on interactions among different subjects, the encyclopedia of language may seem to be an intersubjective entity--the culture's linguistic competence--that creates meaning in individuals. But the notion of a culture's linguistic competence does not survive Ockham's razor; it is a "regulative hypothesis" that does not really exist.[19]

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[17] Eco, Theory 124.

[18] Eco, Philosophy 68.

[19] Eco, Theory 128; Philosophy 84.

The Intersubjective Fallacy and a Protagorean Response

If there were an intersubjective system of meanings, rhetoric would have to affect the whole cultural system; and theories of stepped series of effects would make little sense. But there is, in fact, no cultural competence in language. There are only individual competences. Culture and society cannot do talk, they are talk, in the broad sense in which all semiotic transactions are talk. The term "culture" stands for all the individual transactions that take place within whatever fuzzy boundaries we use to delimit the term. "Society" is the sum of those transactions viewed formally as institutionalized relationships. Although they are fictions, both concepts are useful as a shorthand to stand for all the individual actions involved. But to view either as an entity in itself capable of regulating behavior or creating "meaning" is an error that I call the "intersubjective fallacy."

"Man is the measure of all things," Protagoras wrote, "of things that are as to how they are, and of things that are not as to how they are not."[20] "Man" (anthropos) is the individual, not the human race, nor a culture, nor an intersubjective agreement.[21] Individual human beings produce signs in the process of living their individual human lives. Other individuals interpret those signs. Repeated interactions become predictable and habitual. The individual experiences these habitual interactions as if they were self-existing institutions.[22] So we as individuals come to believe that some such thing as an American language exists, in which words have "correct" meanings and pronunciations. In fact, the only languages that exist are the individual expression and content systems that each one of us has--our own semi-structured encyclopedias. Certainly, there must be a similarity between each of our languages for us to interact; but that similarity need not be more than

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[20] G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 85. This translation interprets hos to mean "how" rather than "that." Since the discussion of Plato in the Theaetetus is about qualia, "how" seems to better capture the meaning. Note that this is a question of attempting to match semantic fields of different individuals operating with different histories of interaction, i.e., "cultures."

[21] Kerferd 86.

[22] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1967) 53-67.

a family resemblance between our individual units of meaning. A given unit of meaning in my language may resemble a given unit in your language in the fact that they share some semantic markers, much like I may look something like my father because my nose and lips are similar. But I am not identical to my father, and my semiotic system is not the same as his even though I learned much of it through interaction with him.

Since every semantic field depends on the rest of the content system for its limits, that is, its definition, no two of us share exactly the same semantic fields for a given unit of meaning. Predication in a proposition is an act of interpreting within a semiotic system. If no two of us share the same semantic field for a given predicate, then only the individual can be the measure of the meaning of that predication. So the individual is the master of meaning, the only measure of a predication of something that is as to how it is. The wind is warm to me and cool to you because we have different shapes to our semantic fields for "warm" and "cool." In this case, my semantic field for "warm" overlaps your semantic field for "cool."

Not only is the individual the measure of all things, but the act of measurement, that is, the semiotic act of experiencing, helps to constitute the self. In fact, what we call the self may be nothing more than the memory of experiences and the indefinite almost infinite process of interpreting those experiences. In other words, the self may be nothing more than our individual version of Eco's labyrinthine encyclopedia. Insofar as the encyclopedia may be influenced by rhetoric, to that degree we define ourselves rhetorically. Thus a pragmatic theory of rhetoric accounts not only for the self's experience of the environment but also the self's experience of itself.

Rhetoric and Our Meaning Systems

I have tried to abandon a hypostatized notion of culture and return to a Protagorean view. With that understood I can now return to the attenuated construct of culture as the sum total of individual interactions in order to summarize rhetorical effects on that idiosyncratic encyclopedia called the self. A good deal of what individuals experience consists of the rhetoric of others. Again we can turn to Protagoras for an illustration of how the rhetoric of others affects individual encyclopedias. In Plato's dialogue

Protagoras, Socrates has asked Protagoras how virtue could possibly be taught. As part of his extended reply, Protagoras explains:

> As soon as the infant can understand what is said to it, nurse, mother, tutor and father himself vie with each other to ensure that the child will develop the best possible character, so that, whatever it does or says, they instruct it, pointing out that 'this is just, that is unjust; this is fine, that is base; this is holy, that is unholy; do this, don't do that.'[23]

Twenty-four centuries later, Berger and Luckmann concur with Protagoras in their discussion of the "primary socialization" of the child and the "significant others" who are "imposed upon him":

> Their [the significant others'] definitions of his situation are posited for him as objective reality. He is thus born into not only an objective social structure but also an objective social world. The significant others who mediate this world to him modify it in the course of mediating it. They select aspects of it in accordance with their own location in the social structure, and also by virtue of their individual, biographically rooted idiosyncrasies.[24]

Rhetoricians, of course, can immediately recognize that the means of this process of socialization is epideictic rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise and blame. Epideictic not only teaches the child what to attend to in the environment, it also associates valences as semantic markers with those features of the environment that are also encoded as semantic markers delineating the semantic field. The child's encyclopedia then begins to include both denotations and connotations of these semiotic experiences. Eco is not clear on why some semantic markers are denotations and others are connotations. I suggest that denotations are those markers that the individual finds used most often by other individuals in labeling experiences. Connotative markers are used less often but still form part of the individual's memory of an experience. Values and attitudes are simply more complex interpretations of links of semantic markers, some of which are denotative and others connotative.

So the individual encyclopedia is formed through semiotic experiences. But obviously an encyclopedia without hierarchy is useless for practical decisions. Decisions require decision trees, categorizations and priorities.

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[23] Plato, Protagoras, trans. B. A. F. Hubbard and E. S. Karnofsky, The Dialogues of Plato (New York: Bantam, 1986) 153.

[24] Berger & Luckmann 131.

In encountering life, we form our encyclopedias; to cope with life, we construct dictionaries. The dictionaries do not explain our meaning system but they are imposed upon them and derived from them.

Besides offering us new links between semantic markers in our encyclopedias, rhetors also try to code those links into a hierarchical framework. This, it seems to me, is what is taking place in Railsback's description of rhetorical effects:

> A rhetor uses a piece of discourse to change the language structure by strengthening the intensity attached to some terms and weakening others. Rhetors attempt to strengthen, establish, weaken, or eliminate links between one term and others.[25]

In short, rhetors are constantly trying to reshape our sprawling encyclopedias into more precise dictionaries.

Rhetors often insist on privileging their dictionary by claiming that it represents reality; all other meanings for terms are errors. This is the sense of privilege in foundational theories of epistemology that Rorty attacks.[26] Not that there is anything wrong with creating dictionaries; the dictionaries are necessary for our practical work. In fact, the dictionaries may be considered as the backbone of Kuhn's paradigms.[27] A dictionary provides the vocabulary for solving puzzles. Differing dictionaries are necessarily incommensurable because the semantic fields for the terms used are different. At bottom, a dictionary's claim for loyal support can only be defended rhetorically or poetically. As Rorty puts it, we should "judge each such vocabulary on pragmatic or aesthetic grounds alone."[28]

If dictionaries are not taken to be necessary descriptions of reality, they are ethical and useful rhetorical tools. We do not work from our global

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[25] Celeste Condit Railsback, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism: A Structural-Material Model of Truth and Objective Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech 69 (1983): 360. Railsback bases her model on Eco's semiotics as well, but her notion of bounded network disagrees with Peirce's notion of unlimited semiosis.

[26] Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 159.

[27] Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 195-204.

[28] Rorty 208.

encyclopedias but from dictionaries constructed to map a particular problem area. As Eco explains:

> Thus, if the encyclopedia is an unordered set of markers (and of frames, scripts, text-oriented instructions), the dictionary-like arrangements we continuously provide are transitory and pragmatically useful hierarchical reassessments of it. In this sense one should turn upside down a current distinction between dictionary (strictly 'semantic') and encyclopedia (polluted with 'pragmatic' elements); on the contrary, the encyclopedia is a semantic concept and the dictionary is a pragmatic device.[29]

Taken pragmatically, dictionaries allow us to call a halt to the never-ending process of interpreting signs and interpreting the interpretants long enough to get some work done. All dictionary definitions are useful ad hoc tools.

A good example of the use of a dictionary is the stipulation of operational definitions in a scientific report. We could spend our lifetimes trying to define a concept like personality according to all the semantic markers it could possibly have among a given population. Or we could stipulate that for our purposes personality means the score on a particular test instrument. Then we could get some work done. And since we have artificially narrowed the semantic field of personality, we could more confidently fit our work in with that of others who are using the same operationalized definition. However, if we were then to claim that our definition of personality was the correct explanation for the way that "personality" is used within a given population, or that we had solved the mystery of "personality," we would be wrong. We would be privileging our own observable semantic markers at the expense of others. And if we were honest, we would have to admit that the operational definition of personality didn't even begin to cover our own understanding of what "personality" means.

Rhetoric--whether scientific, philosophical, theological, political, or even poetic--becomes ideological when it demands that a given dictionary be treated as foundational because it corresponds to reality. Ideologies are dictionaries that claim to represent reality with neat and tidy definitions that are consistent with each other. Unfortunately, to be consistent such ideologies must eliminate from their semantic fields markers that are

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[29] Eco Philosophy 85.

ambiguous and contradictory.[30] Yet, as we saw earlier, those semantic markers are traces of life experiences. So the rhetor asks us to eliminate some memories in order to maintain the symmetry of the ideological system. For example, if we are going to accept an ideology of rugged individualism, we must eliminate those semantic markers for the concept justice that include concern for the weak, including those times we were weak and someone cared for us.

No ideological rhetor is wholly successful. No matter how complex, a consistent dictionary cannot replace the underlying encyclopedia. However, certain memory traces recede into the background temporarily, while others are linked more strongly to the sign-vehicle; these stronger markers become denotations. Repeated rhetoric in support of this belief system reinforces the connections, and individuals become more rigid in their beliefs. Yet, at any time, another rhetor may remind a listener of contradictory semantic markers buried within the underlying encyclopedia. In this way, dissonance and the concomitant possibility of weakening dictionary meanings result. Vivacity is important to the rhetor trying to counter ideology since lively imagery revitalizes weakened memory traces. To this end, poetry may be more effective than traditional forms of rhetoric because poetry can aim at the rejuvenation or creation of semantic links without blatantly challenging the structure of the dictionary. Poetry considered rhetorically is epideictic in the same sense that primary socialization was. Both create memory links between clusters of complex semiotic experiences. Both enable later rhetorical acts to draw upon these deepened semantic fields.

Implications for "Epistemic" Rhetoric

Obviously, a pragmatic, semiotically-based theory of rhetoric offers little support for the argument that rhetoric brings about episteme as certain knowledge of reality. In this pragmatic theory, all human knowing is semiosis, and semiosis is a process of infinite regress. On the other hand, humans may make claims to knowledge based on their construction of an ad hoc dictionary and their audience's acceptance of that dictionary as a framework of knowledge. Within that framework (dominant paradigm, if you prefer), one

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[30] Eco Theory 293.

might argue that a given proposition is knowledge because it is a "justified, true belief." The one arguing attempts to justify the proposition by showing that it agrees with the allowable semantic markers of the dictionary, including those syntactic markers that say how terms may be combined. The proposition is shown to be true by comparing it to the accepted foundational terms of the dictionary--the "atomic facts" of this dictionary. So, in the dictionary of an ideal language that Wittgenstein created, "the truth possibilities of the elementary propositions are the conditions of the truth and falsehood of the [other] propositions."[31] Finally, the justified and true proposition is a belief of the one arguing when it is not contradicted by any semantic markers of the underlying encyclopedia, which represent the memories of life-experiences of the claimant. If the argument succeeds, the proposition becomes an accepted item of knowledge within that dictionary.

But because dictionaries are local and pragmatic, no literally universal knowledge claims can be supported by a semiotic theory. This is not to say that something we know cannot be a universal truth but rather to say that we cannot know when a truth is universal. Truth is correspondence to the foundational terms of the local dictionary, not to an unmediated reality. The test for foundational terms is simply whether they continue to work. Truth, then, is actually coherence within a system. In the same way, objectivity is not knowledge of pure object, but the elimination of irrelevant semantic markers. Relevance is determined pragmatically. If I am scientifically classifying scorpions, my personal antipathy to them is irrelevant. On the other hand, if I am classifying household pests into a priority list in order to buy insecticide, my personal relationship with scorpions becomes relevant. We say that one classification is more "objective" than the other only because we allow the scientific dictionary greater influence on our encyclopedic semantic field for "objective." Such influences are an indicator of the ideological power of the scientific dictionary.

If rhetoric serves an epistemological function, it does so by building and destroying ad hoc dictionaries for the purpose of getting something done. Science and, for that matter, dialectic both work within narrowly defined

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[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 4.41.

dictionaries to extend the coverage of the dictionary or to reduce ambiguities in terms by division and definition. Rhetoric alone can compare incommensurate dictionaries because, as Protagoras taught, rhetoric can argue two sides of the same question. Protagoras claimed that apparently contradictory statements about the same thing could be true.[32] His claim makes sense if the contradictory statements are made based on incommensurate dictionaries, both of which have some foundation in the underlying encyclopedia of semiotic life-experiences. Yet Protagoras did not simply wish to argue both sides but to make one side stronger:

> His theory corresponds to his rhetorical practice, is in fact an epistemological justification of the importance of rhetoric. The rhetor must be able to defend opposing points of view with equal success but finally to bring one to victory as the 'stronger'. Just so the epistemologist proves that all views are equally true because each grasps one facet of the truth, then decides for one as the 'better'.[33]

The better argument is one that is "more useful or expedient, a belief that will produce better effects in the future."[34] Because rhetoric employs probabilistic and pragmatic criteria, it is capable of comparing incommensurate dictionaries and opting for one as the more useful. By comparing dictionaries to criteria of usefulness, pragmatic rhetoric enables us to adapt our dictionaries to changing life experiences.

This explanation of the epistemological function of rhetoric is, of course, optimistic. Rhetoric may just as well seek to reify a given dictionary as an ideology. Rhetors may refuse to consider both sides, the dissoi logoi. All of which only proves once again that rhetoric is a neutral tool to be used for good or ill. When used for good, rhetoric contributes to knowledge, not in the sense of comprehension of essences, but in the sense of the ability to generate an appropriate response for an environmental demand.[35]

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[32] W. K. C. Guthrie, The Sophists (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 182.

[33] H. Gomperz, cited in Guthrie 174.

[34] Guthrie 175.

[35] For an epistemological discussion of knowledge as ability to produce a correct response, see Alan R. White, The Nature of Knowledge (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).

Conclusion

What I have offered here is a loose dictionary of my own. It is an attempt to structure the disparate interpretants we have about rhetoric and semiotics into a structure of practical knowledge. I leave it to philosophers to argue about what is beyond semiosis; to me it seems sufficient to observe that we must engage our environment semiotically. I have found this particular dictionary useful for my understanding, and I believe it has practical applications that remain to be explored. For example, I think that the semiotic concept of "overcoding" is useful in understanding the reinforcing methods of epideictic rhetoric. I also think the degree to which a discourse works within a dictionary or attempts to appeal to the underlying encyclopedia could be used to differentiate types of discourse, such as dialectic, rhetoric, and poetic. But these are issues for future development. What I have hoped to do here is begin to erect a framework for a rhetorical theory grounded in semiotics and to use that rough framework as a tool for examining rhetoric's role in shaping our experience of life.